Learning about difference from observations of Case Study

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Stephanie Roberts, a multidisciplinary artist and I, an art therapist and Foundation Year social science lecturer have been friends for nearly twenty years, both living in Newport, South-East Wales. We have individually been working with local communities since the mid 1990s and came together during Spring 2017 in Stephanie's studio, nestled underneath Newport's transporter bridge, to collaborate for the first time. The nature of this collaboration was unclear at first but during our initial conversation, following an invitation from Stephanie for me to see her new project, we decided to meet regularly and work towards writing together.

Stephanie had been awarded an Arts Council of Wales grant for her project entitled Case Study, which aimed to creatively explore her personal challenges with dyslexia and produce an exhibition. "The complex nature of dyslexia's disorientations can often manifest as personal well being issues" she says.

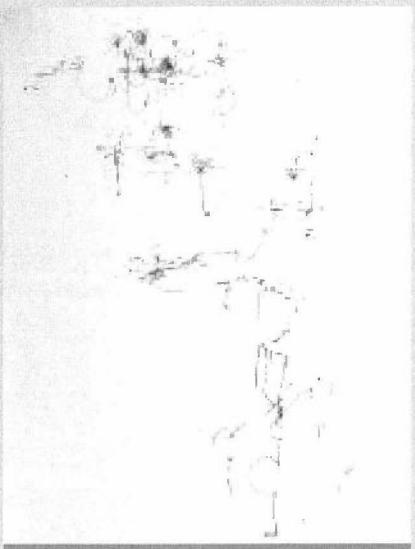
We met monthly between May and September, spending an hour or so looking at the emerging body of work. Conversations emerged about the aesthetic developments, parallel psychological processes, and metaphors. These studio visits reminded me of the twenty week Infant Observation module during my MA Art Therapy training. My sense was one of uncertainty about my role and purpose. However, by reflecting on the conversations and intricately observing this sensitive period, much could be learnt and shared.

Dyslexia affects around 10% of the British population (The British Dyslexia Association, 2018) and among art communities the percentage is significantly higher (Royal College of Art, 2015; Wolff & Lundberg, 2002). The arts seem to have something to offer dyslexic learners.

Publicity piece (Roberts, 2008)

In teaching Foundation Year Social Science students, I have found that many enter Higher Education from non-traditional learning backgrounds, often discovering that they are dyslexic during this first year at university. My time with Stephanie made me more aware that my experiences and ways of thinking as an art therapist and artist can help to inform my learning about the needs of my non-art students.

During my first visit to her studio, Stephanie showed me her own baby blanket. She pushed her fingers through enlarged holes within the soft white knitted diamond shapes. These spaces soon became a focus of our conversation, representing pauses in 'blind drawings' and doodles in which Stephanie could delve deeper. "These pauses ..." Stephanie says, "became the heart of the issue and the beginning of my way out. It wasn't what I *could* understand in my drawings, it was what I *couldn't* that gave the insight ... If the blankie cwtshed me ... I would fall through the holes." *(Cwtsh is a Welsh word, originally meaning cubbyhole under the stairs or hiding place. It also means a cuddle or warm hug. Here Stephanie used it to mean snuggled in a shawl).*

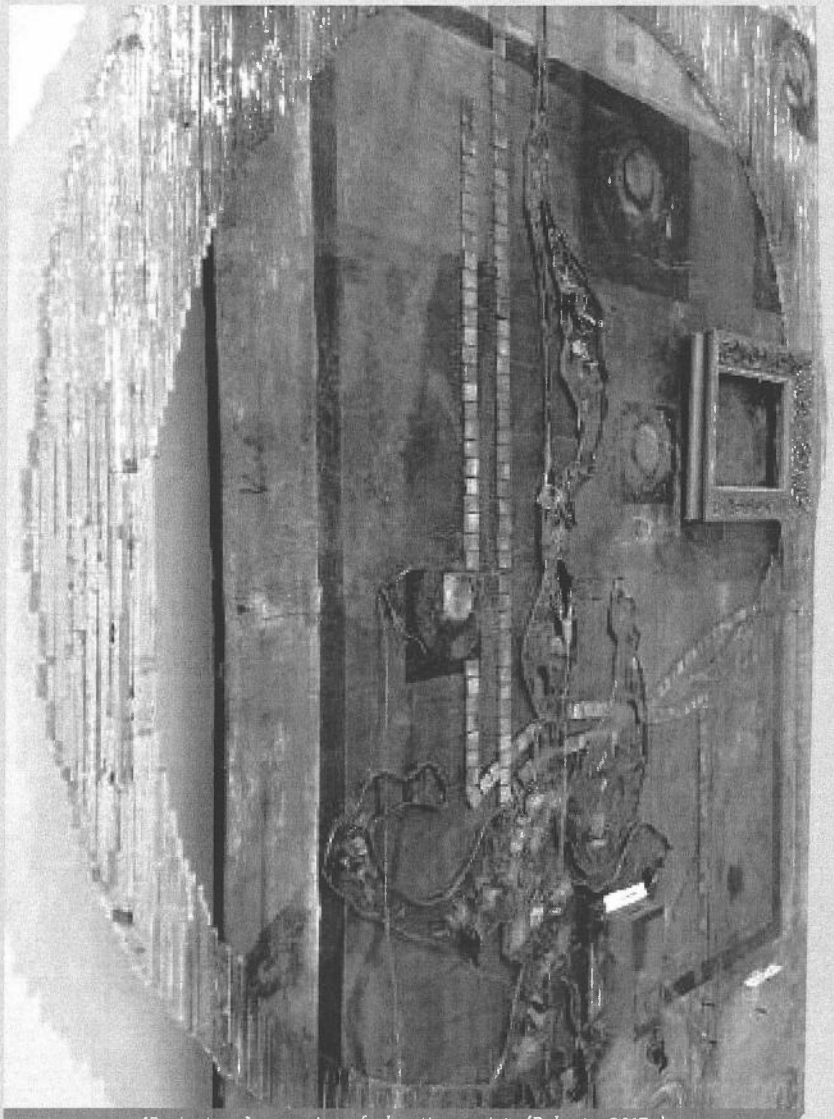


The meeting that went wrong (Roberts, 2017c)

British sculptor, Peter Randall-Page talks of Rubin's Vase illustrating the ability to flip at will between positive and negative spaces. Spaces, he states, are as significant as letters, highlighting that negative spaces can be helpful. The spaces between words and letters can flow like great white streams down a page of text; brilliant for drawing, but it can make for slow reading (Randall-Page, P. & Randall-Page, C. personal communication, May 23, 2018). Randall-Page, also dyslexic and similarly to Stephanie, up until the age of 12, gained understanding and knowledge of the world from direct observation. Randall-Page (2015) talks about patterns in the natural world. He describes the classic geometric form and variation of snowflakes, highlighting our pleasure response to snow being on both an emotional and intellectual level. Much of his work, especially his Mind Map (2009) series, for me, resonates with Stephanie's mosaic work, her specialism. The process of mosaic, piecing together pixel-like fragments, creates a melody.

Stephanie began her process collecting daffodils; symbolising she says, "... her family, self and sensibilities". She seriously played, curiously explored and rigorously studied different methods of freeze framing moments within their life cycle. Seasonal changes in the natural environment provided metaphor. At the conception of the project, she summoned "her forest of emotions" from her 'darkness', finding ways to closely look at the trees within the wood. With close attention, she created "three dimensional interpretations", while she says "reliving past memories". She exhibited her creations and findings around her studio; some in glass cabinets like specimens, which were later displayed as a secondary showcase in Newport's Museum and Library space.

By attending to loss, limitations and learning challenges, doors opened, towards Stephanie's desired new start. It felt



45 minutes: An exorcism of education anxiety (Roberts, 2017a)

important to keep reminding myself of the boundaries of my role; I was not practising art therapy in this situation, however, I could not lose the art therapist's perspective. Trevor Griffiths (Emotional Logic Centre, 2016) talks of the logical and emotional processes of adjusting to change. His life-long learning model teaches that our patterns of multiple combinations of unpleasant e-motions (i.e. energy in motion) including denial, depression, anger and guilt, are intended to move us to explore new creative ways to live; he identifies a growth cycle of seven core loss emotions, starting with shock, moving towards bargaining and acceptance, where we can find new ways to connect with others.

I felt that Stephanie needed myself and others to provide, while she, in the safe space of her studio, learnt and got to know herself in this apparent transitioning period of her life. Social media posts were an important way for her to share her process of gathering followers. The posts were also a way of holding people's attention in hope that they would attend the exhibition, participate in sustainable activity, engage in dialogue, and support others (this could be seen as the bargaining phase). It was initially the words, phrases and hash-tags that she seemed to be asking me for, however, our conversations meant more; they helped us both to gain a deeper understanding.

Stephanie's journey began with the intention to have mentors. One of the mentors, a local artist whom Stephanie knew and felt safe with, re-introduced her to 'blind drawing'. This process enabled her to 'extract out of her mind', seeing her thoughts, memories and emotions visually for the first time.

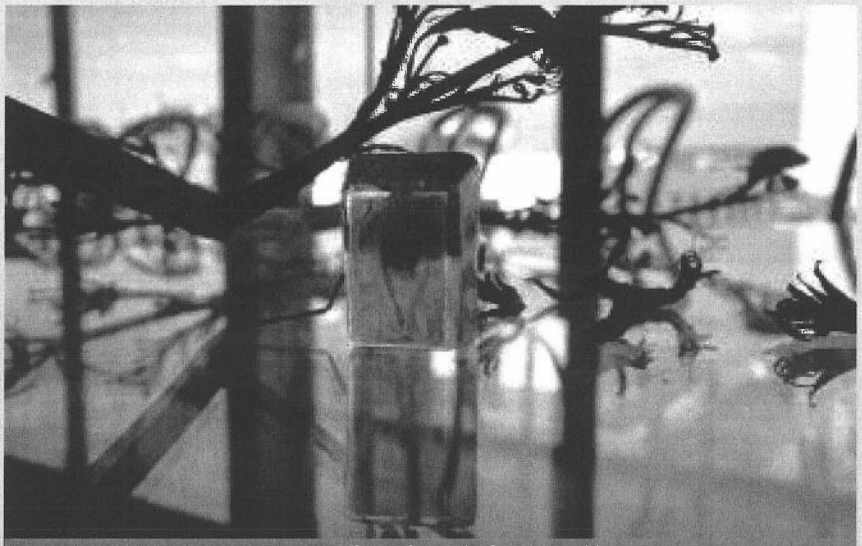
Another mentor was a mosaic artist, whose minimalistic work had inspired Stephanie. In conversation, they later decided that their relationship was not one of mentorship but exchange. Stephanie described exchange as, "... every bit of collaboration comes with an exchange of learning."

A local member of the Arts and Education Network had the specific role of helping Stephanie with her dyslexia while writing her bid. Stephanie also met with an arts-based researcher, also dyslexic, who listened to her and helped to find words for marketing the exhibition. The final collaborator was me, invited through Stephanie's intrigue about art therapy.

As a mosaic artist, Stephanie said that mosaic was unable to reveal all the hidden layers of a story; so she was choosing to utilise the potential 'transparency' of paint. Stephanie shared her sense of abandonment as a child during our first meeting. It seemed that she had reached a point where she needed to soften and reveal some of her vulnerabilities. Caroline Case's article (2006) talks of the evocative feelings of abandonment experienced by her client 'Lucy'. Through observation of this nine year old child, finding relief through cutting things up, Case understood 'Lucy' wanting to be powerful, not needing anybody, and showing 'gymnastic defences' against feeling.

In Case's differentiation between cutting and tearing, I was reminded of my own intense processes of ripping, tearing and repositioning, through a period of shock and anger in response to loss. I was curious about the tesserae nipping, the small hard pieces that Stephanie generally works with and her own particular technique of encasing or outlining, with a softer more malleable lead or copper, as a strongly contrasting sensory experience. In her search to tell her story, during the current project, she allowed different materials such as petals, paper, felt, hessian and ink to "find her". She then "... manipulated them to become each emotion or situation". Her approach was "... spontaneous and untainted as a result ... only directed by process; sealing the fragility of the past with resin".

Case gives a definition and detailed description of scissors which reminds me of a self-portrait by Stephanie, in mosaic (2008). Here, Stephanie is portrayed, on the side of her former vehicle, as a woman wearing a floral pink and green skirt, with the breeze running through her hair, proudly holding the tool of her trade; a pair of nippers.



Suppressed in isolation (Roberts, 2017b)

Watching Stephanie helped me to see my own limitations with creative processes; a tendency to hold on to things and get stuck. I worked with Stephanie in her studio on two occasions, one just before the exhibition and one soon afterwards within a workshop. On these occasions, she taught me to use resin and try out a contemporary method of mosaic. Using unfamiliar materials such as slate, tiles, lead, copper and coloured adhesive. I thought about decision making, self confidence and the difficult feelings often experienced while learning a new skill. At moments I felt child-like with panic, feeling stupid. Stephanie and I had, at previous times, talked about 'the idiot'. The first line of text displayed at the entrance to her exhibition read:

"You idiot. I am an idiot ... ? I must be ... an idiot."

The stigma attached to dyslexia can be devastating.

Randall-Page (2018) echoes this when stating that, when not having the magic trick of reading early-on, the 'stupid card' is better played than the lazy one.

It was during my Arts and Health training in 2009 (Insider Art) that I learnt about Karen Huckvale's (2009) adaptation of the Learning Circle. She has evolved the diagram to include Stage 2a, humiliation. Huckvale (personal communication, May 5, 2018) explains, "We are particularly vulnerable to humiliation, anxiety and general resistance to learning in future if others comment unfavourably on our struggle at this stage". This resonates with some of my own experiences as a non-dyslexic learner and with what I see amongst Foundation Year students. I have noticed that experiences of humiliation and shame are often discussed within the dyslexic community.

Marion Milner's practical inquiry into her own creative process to answer questions about traditional education also seemed relevant here. Her book *On Not Being Able to Paint (1950/ 2010)*, was recommended in the first few weeks of my training; and it helped me to shift quickly into new experiences of daily drawing. Her work offers a reference point for both Stephanie's gradual discovery of her strengths, and for my discovery of how educational research can be informed by approaches and theories from the arts and arts therapies. This is helping me to consider the spectrum of therapy and teaching in terms of my own identity. The way in which we now bring psycho-education into the therapy space and aspects of the therapeutic relationship into our classrooms, could be seen as a woodland landscape containing multiple species within, viewed from above is a patchwork.

Following a Case Study project forum and feedback from the exhibition, Stephanie, two other women and myself are forming a new collective called Case2Study. We are currently meeting regularly with the aim of supporting and encouraging fresh dialogue through art and process, to support people with dyslexia. As a group of multi-disciplined adults, we are experiencing the first sight of 'dis-ability' in different ways, yet fervently committed to enter the 'debateable lands' (Learmonth, 2015) of uncertainty and defence to find comprehensibility, manageability and meaningfulness (Jones, 1997 as cited in Learmonth with Huckvale, 2015). Like dyslexia, art therapy is non-linear (Learmonth with Huckvale, 2015), concerned with language unbound by words; yet creatively able to courageously navigate the wood, while working hard to study the individual and different trees. The process is enabled by compassion.

Informed consent has been given by Stephanie Roberts for her full name and website, personal words and images to be published in Newsbriefing. Stephanie offers Creative and Therapeutic Art workshops to schools and local communities, understanding the difference between her role and that of an HCPC registered Art Psychotherapist.

A special thanks to Stephanie Roberts, Karen Huckvale, and Peter and Charlotte Randall-Page.

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